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ABSTRACT

Sentence combining is one kind of practice activity, quite specific in character, aimed at teaching syntactic fluency and judgment and the use of the devices of cohesion. Students can be led through the revision process step by step by converting the odd essay from real writing to a practice exercise, then actually providing the content needed for revision, whether detail or development, in the form of kernel sentences to be combined. First, the teacher identifies a particular place where the writer needs to open up and reenter his or her text and return to active composing. The teacher then provides the necessary kernalized content in the form of a sentence combining exercise. Another idea is for the teacher to write the ad hoc revision exercises only once or twice, after which each student can provide his or her own list of kernel sentences (in effect, his or her own sentence-combining exercise) in response to the teacher's directive, then proceed to work out the exercise in the process of revising the essay. Sentence combining practice enhances the syntactic skills brought to bear in the composing of sentences in a text, and can teach the skills of revising text in the direction of elaboration and development. Since sentence combining really has nothing to do with editing, the best results of sentence combining (improvement in writing) occur when it is used as a tool for allowing students to see available options for revision. (HOD)

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CAN SENTENCE COMBINING PLAY A ROLE IN THE REVISION PROCESS?

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by

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Session Title: Disparate Views on Sentence Combining

About a year ago, a professional acquaintance asked me whether I thought sentence combining (SC) had a part to play in the editing process, in helping students learn how to edit their writing. The present paper represents an attempt to answer that question -- except that somewhere along the way, exactly how I'm not sure, the term "editing" gave way to "revising." Hence the title question: Can SC play a role in the revision process?

Now I've always been persnickety when it comes to SC. To me, SC is not a way of teaching all writing. It is one kind of artificial practice activity, quite specific as to character, aimed at teaching syntactic fluency and judgment, and use of the devices of cohesion. And maybe style. When I think of SC, I see in my mind lists of kernel sentences, artificially deconstructed propositions of thought ready to be combined into the orthographic sentences of ordinary writing. As a result, if as often happens someone shows me a teaching program that claims to be SC and I fail to see in it lists of kernel sentences, I'm not going to call it SC. Nor do I ever think of any SC exercise as real

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writing. To me, it's always an exercise only, a calisthenic activity, something persons can do in between their times of real writing.

But also something they should do! I'm certainly not saying that SC practice is unimportant. Quite the opposite. In fact, I think SC has proven itself the single most powerful language activity students in writing classes can engage in on days when they aren't writing -- more powerful than reading, more powerful than discussion, more powerful than brainstorming, than grammar exercises, than small-group collaborative writing, more powerful even than conferencing with a teacher or tutor, though all these activities are also important and have their place. I'll say it even stronger: show me any writing teacher today, teaching students from nine to nineteen, who isn't assigning at least one SC exercise a week, whatever its form and format, and I'll show you a teacher who is cheating his or her students, a teacher guilty, I suppose, of pedagogical malpractice.

SC comes in many varieties and there is something to be said for each, used in various combinations and with students at varying levels of proficiency. There are the cued single-sentence exercises Frank O'Hare and I pioneered. There is the single-sentence hierarchical base-combining of Will Pitkin, an offspring of the late Francis Christensen's generative rhetoric. There is the sentence-imitation approach of Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams. Most important are the uncued whole-discourse exercises invented by William Strong and deftly extended to the familiar types of college exposition by Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek, Max Morenberg, and many others whose names could be mentioned. Whole-discourse SC opens the door to practice in making stylistic choices and using devices of cohesion. The best current work concerns not only those matters but also cuing schemes introducing the whole family of inter-sentential logical conjunctions. Every kind of SC is important, as is nearly all the ongoing research on the effects of each. As I've said elsewhere (Mellon 1979), the only kind of bad SC research I know of are the freshman composition studies that look upon SC as a one-semester quick-fix factor influencing

holistic essay ratings. Though inevitable at the time they were done, I don't think we want to see any more studies of this sort.

But on to revision. When I first began thinking about SC in the context of revision, I asked myself the question, what's the most difficult part about teaching non-revisers to revise? The answer seems to be, just enabling them to make any substantial changes at all in their initial drafts once submitted to the teacher. By substantial changes I mean changes above the level of mechanics and word choice, and occasionally word order. Probably no one in our profession knows more about teaching revision than Donald Murray (1978), who feels the process to be generally under-taught, under-researched, and not very well understood. National Assessment in 1977 reported an assessment of revision skills, and Lillian Bridwell (1980) includes a comprehensive survey and discussion of revision research in her firstrate study of the revising strategies of twelfth-graders. The general impression one receives is that students understand revision mainly as debugging or smoothing out the bumps in first-draft writing, as editing really, whereas teachers, to judge from their comments on student papers, most often take revision to mean writing more, considerably more, at various places in the original text, typically, more concrete detail in descriptive or explanatory passages, and more fully developed lines of reasoning in argumentative passages.

Now my guess is that the thing inhibiting real revision, that makes it seem so hard to bring about, is that young writers are somehow enthralled by their initial versions. I don't quite know why, but a supposedly finished composition takes on a fixity of structure in the writer's mind that makes it almost impossible for the student to re-enter and "open up" this or that paragraph, conceiving things that weren't initially conceived and writing things that weren't initially written. So, I reasoned, students need to be <u>led through</u> the revision process step by step for the first time or two, more or less by the numbers. One way to do this, to initiate students into revision and free them from the clutches of their own first drafts, would be to do so artificially, by

converting the odd essay from real writing to a practice exercise, then actually providing the content needed for revision, whether detail or development, in the form of kernel sentences to be combined. In short, why not provide each student with an ad hoc SC exercise simulating the activity of revising and tailormade to the essay at hand?

Let me illustrate the process I am talking about. Suppose a twelfth-grader or a college freshman in a developmental course is asked to write a brief persuasive/argumentative essay on the following topic, which happened in fact to be used by National Assessment in its 1978-79 writing assessment:

Original Topic:

Some high school students have proposed converting an old house into a recreation center where young people might drop in evenings for talk and relaxation. Some local residents oppose the plan on the grounds that the center would depress property values in the neighborhood and attract undesirable types. A public hearing has been called. Write a brief statement that you would make supporting or opposing the plan. Remember to take only one point of view. Organize your arguments carefully and be as convincing as possible. (From the 1978-79 writing assessment, National Assessment of Educational Progress)

In twenty or thirty minutes the student submits the following first draft:

Writer's Original Essay:

The students should have their recreation center. Most of the time students get into trouble for lack of something to do and someplace to go. They hang around stores and things and many end up committing a crime that way. If they were given somewhere to go, the chances of their getting into trouble would be a lot slimmer. If the recreation center is a nice place to go to and they set good rules for the students to follow, there'll be no trouble.

The teacher reads the essay and observes, doubtless among other things, that the third sentence needs to be revised. The writer has missed an opportunity to expand his or her first thought and to paint a really detailed picture impressing upon the reader the behaviors of young people with idle time on their hands and no place to go. So the

teacher works up the following SC exercise consisting of kernalized content constituting the elaborating details the writer needs to revise sentence three:

Sentence-Combining Task #1:

They hang around stores.
They play games with the owner or employees.
They may drink and do drugs.
They drive up and down the streets in their loud cars.
They pump quarters into video games.
They look for strangers to hassle.
They look for younger kids to rip off.
They look for members of the opposite sex to harass sexually.
They often end up committing a crime.

Similarly, the teacher notes that the final sentence of the essay really begs the question of the entire assignment, omits a premise of the argument on which it assumedly turns, and fails to address the issue of property value raised in the topic question. So the teacher creates the following SC exercise presenting kernalized content plus suggested logical conjunctions to help the writer revise the final sentence so that it more adequately develops the line of reasoning it aims to embody:

Sentence-Combining Task #2:

BECAUSE Students are basically good people.
Idleness is the main cause of their rowdy behavior.

IF The recreation center is well equipped.
The recreation center is attractively maintained.

AND IF The students are given a say in governing the place.
The students form an association of members.
The students set rules barring uncooperative individuals.

THEN The neighborhood will be rid of kids just hanging around.
The overall atmosphere will improve.
The property values may improve.

The student now works out the tailormade revision exercises just as he or she would work any free-standing SC exercises, except that they are integrated as revisions into a re-write of the original essay. The student may make other revisions as well, but at a minimum the essay would now look like this:

Revised Essay:

The students should have their recreation center. Most of the time students get into trouble for lack of something to do and someplace to go. They hang around stores playing games with the owner or employees or pumping quarters into video games, or drive up and down the streets in their loud cars, drinking and doing drugs, looking for strangers to hassle, younger kids to rip off, or members of the opposite sex to harass sexually, and often end up committing a crime. If they were given somewhere to go, the chances of their getting into trouble would be a lot slimmer. Because students are basically good people and idleness is the main cause of their rowdiness, if the recreation center were well equipped and attractively maintained, and if the students were given a say in governing the place and formed an association to set rules barring uncooperative individuals, then the neighborhood would be rid of kids just hanging around, and its overall atmosphere would improve, and maybe even its property values.

Here several things need acknowledging. As I've already stated, the approach I'm recommending requires the student to shift from real writing to a practice exercise. What the student is doing is of course not actual revising but artificial revising. But that's OK! The artificial practice enables the student subsequently to go on to do the actual activity. It's like learning to fly a jetliner, where pilots start with a flight simulator then go to the real aircraft.

Second, it happens that both of the revisions in the illustration I've just given are designed to result in single sentences. This is purely accidental. The teacher can create SC revision exercises leading to several new sentences of text, or even to complete new paragraphs. The important thing is that it's a two-step process. First the teacher identifies a particular place where the writer needs to open up and re-enter his or her text and return to active composing. Second, the teacher then provides the kernalized content the writer needs in order to do so, in the form of a SC exercise.

Moving on, I further acknowledge that writing these ad hoc SC exercises will be neither quick nor effortless for the teacher. They have to be tailormade, one student and one essay at a time. It's one thing for the teacher to write in the margin "needs

more detail," and quite another to list six or eight kernel sentences in the form of a SC exercise that will allow the student to simulate the process of providing the needed additional detail. But maybe once or twice per student will be enough, and in return the teacher would be spared writing the grandiose but futile summary comments we ordinarily place on student papers.

Another idea would be for the teacher to write the ad hoc revision exercises only once or twice, after which each student can provide his or her own list of kernel sentences, in effect, his or her own SC exercise, in response to the teacher's directive, then proceed to work out the exercise in the process of revising the essay. In other words, we can wean students away from teacher-written revision exercises by having them use the kernel-sentence format of SC as a way of discovering and listing their own idea content, when revising. And in the interim stages, really clever teachers will have the students themselves write SC revision exercises for each other. The teacher needn't do all the work. High school and college students accustomed to free-standing SC practice can easily learn to write revision exercises for one another, and strengthen their own revising skills into the bargain.

Finally, I fully realize there is more to revision than just adding details and developing ideas, frequent though such opportunities are, inarguably I think, in student writing. Maybe SC can find uses elsewhere in the revision process, and maybe not. But even if SC works only in instances where more detail and/or development is needed, the number of such instances will always be large, I suspect. And mastery of this sort of revision could prove the key to freeing students to try revising for emphasis, style, tone, and so on. So the research ought to be done, impartial studies telling us whether tailormade SC exercises really can initiate students into the revision process, and promote its mastery, as a discovery activity ultimately carried out on their own, quite without the teacher's help. Though I know of no such studies in progress, I nonetheless hope to see some such experiment reported in the not too distant future, in the pages of Research in the Teaching of English.

I said at the beginning of this paper that my topic was first suggested to me as editing, not revision. I'm glad it got changed to revision. Quite obviously, I think there are real possibilities for extending the domain of SC from that of a free-standing language practice into the area of revision, just as, I might add, it has recently been extended into the area of assessment, a fact attested by the forthcoming report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress on the battery of SC exercises included in its 1978-79 writing assessment.

But a final word is in order on the question of SC and editing. I myself don't think SC has anything to contribute to the editing process. Teachers knew how to teach the elimination of fragments and the hooking together of short choppy sentences, for example, long before SC came along. Ironically, however, the idea persists in some quarters that SC is merely editing practice. Not so. The history of SC is strewn with misconceptions. SC has variously been thought to need grammar when it does not, to be mechanical when it is anything but, and to encourage gratuitous complexity of expression when it does nothing of the kind. Now it must be understood that the lists of kernalized propositions comprising SC exercises are never meant to represent anyone's unedited first-draft writing, nor is SC ever introduced as such to students. SC practice enhances the syntactic skills brought to bear in the composing of sentences in a text, and I have tried to suggest in this paper that SC can also teach the skills of revising text in the direction of elaboration and development, but it really has nothing to do with editing at all. As my former colleague William Smith (1981) wrote recently, in discussing the potential of SC, "the best results, i.e., improvement in writing, seem to have occurred when SC was used as a tool for allowing students to see available options" (p. 79). That sounds very much like revision to me.

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